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ABSTRACT

The background, challenge, opportunity, and excitement of hermeneutics can be explored in three signposts of a hermeneutic turn in a doctoral research proposal: from being gifted to gifted reading, from method to interpretation, and from metacognition to the hermeneutic circle. A change in the research site of a study of the metacognitive processes of gifted 12-year-olds resulted in a shift from focusing on gifted children to focusing on a program of gifted education. The original project was designed for the constant comparative method in the discovery of grounded theory. As part of the second signpost, the hermeneutic challenge is to truth through method. Hermeneutic understanding of gifted reading involves interpreting what is at play in what readers are saying and doing. The third signpost suggests that hermeneutics challenges that there is more to gifted reading than self-conscious executive processes. The hermeneutic circle provides the opportunity for understanding the ontological primacy of a gifted way of living with texts. Four gifts present themselves around the hermeneutic circle: imagination, enigma, ignorance, and incarnation. Before reading researchers abstract the essence of lived experience, they are all hermeneuticists who stand together on common ground in the desire to improve conditions for students and teachers in the educational life-world. (A figure illustrating the sympathetic vibrations in a hermeneutic fusion of horizons and a figure illustrating the circular path of hermeneutic understanding are included; 22 references are attached.) (RS)

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A Paradigm Shift to Reading Around the Hermeneutic Circle

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A Paradigm Shift to Reading Around the Hermeneutic Circle

Aoki (1978) drew our attention to the reverse-Columbus phenomenon: 500 years after Columbus discovered America, North American researchers are discovering Continental European thinking. Hermeneutics, the common currency of European postmodern philosophy and culture, is named for the ancient Greek god Hermes who created language as the medium of human existence. The Greeks named the interpretative dialogical engagement by which we understand ourselves and the world in which we live, hermeneutics. This paper opens a space for dialogue about what happens to the meaning of gifted reading in a paradigm shift from cognitive research in the modernist tradition to a postmodern study of reading around the hermeneutic circle.

Much of the recent interest in paradigm shifts can be traced to Kuhn's (1970) writing on the subject. Kuhn wrote about science as a social community where members are initiated into one or another research paradigm. Research paradigms, according to Kuhn, are loosely connected sets of philosophical beliefs, methods, and exemplars in problem solving which establish boundaries for research, govern the conduct of inquiry, and establish criteria for judging results. When researchers are challenged by questions which cannot be addressed within the familiar boundaries of their paradigm such questions are frequently devalued or dismissed. In a few cases when something new appears on the horizon, researchers give themselves over to the spirit of adventure and leave the familiar world behind. Finding themselves at home in the otherworldliness of an alien landscape reveals the paradigm shift.

In what follows I explore three signposts of a hermeneutic turn in my recent Ph.D. research: from being gifted to gifted reading, from method to interpretation, and from

metacognition to the hermeneutic circle. Each is discussed to draw out some of the background, challenge, opportunity, and excitement of hermeneutics. A final section discusses the contribution that hermeneutics offers the reading community.

The Turn to Hermeneutics

From Being Gifted to Gifted Reading

Background

My doctoral research proposal was a study of metacognitive processes in the reading of gifted 12-year-olds. The research was viewed as exploratory and the project had an "emergent" design, a research design that is not settled beforehand but emerges over the course of the investigation. In addition, although I was a Ph.D. candidate in education curriculum and instruction, the theoretical framework for the proposed research was psychology. The history of research on reading processes, Venesky (1984) observed, is largely the history of cognitive psychology. Psychology found reading a convenient vehicle for advancing the science of the human mind and, as a result, much of what is known in education about reading is psychological. Alvino (1983) pointed out that the dominant voice in gifted education is also psychology. Moveover, Alvino claimed "we only talk to ourselves" and "little effort is made in integrating other disciplines into our *understanding* of gifted education" (p. 2). Psychology is a bastion of the modern paradigm in the human sciences.

The hermeneutic turn in this research began with a quintessential hermeneutic *hap*, the unpredictable that *just happens* in life. Services for gifted children were the major casualty in the school district's budget cuts and, as a result, information that was deemed necessary to continue the project was neither readily available nor forthcoming. The proposal was withdrawn and entry into another school district in the same city was

successfully negotiated.

Challenge

There are two general strategies for the identification of giftedness: definition *to* process, and definition *through* process (Sillito & Wilde, 1983). The strategy on the first research site was definition to process. This involves setting up the identification process as a means of operationalizing a previously accepted definition of giftedness (Marland, 1971). Attention is focused on psychological properties which lead to the formation of exclusive categories of "gifted" and "not-gifted" children. In other words, with the strategy of definition to process, it is the *children* who are gifted. On the second research site, the identification strategy was definition through process. This approach encourages setting up an enrichment program and those students who successfully move through the program are said to demonstrate gifted behaviors (Renzulli & Reis, 1981). Three clusters of psychological traits define giftedness in this model: above average ability, creativity, and task commitment. The change in research site, therefore, resulted in a shift of focus from children who were gifted to a *program* of gifted education.

That a change in research site could shift giftedness from child to program gave me pause. This breathing space challenged me to question the ways I might put into question the understanding of giftedness that I live with and accept without question. What is *given* in giftedness?

Opportunity

The word "opportunity" is derived from the Latin, *portus,* which originally meant a door or a passage. Writing about gifted education, Dettmer (1988) cautioned that "our neatly stacked concepts and practices in education...threaten to obscure interesting

doorways of opportunity for excellence in education and appropriate programs for all students (p. 33). Dettmer, however, did not go far enough to question the taken-for-grantedness of the priority of the *concept* in modernist research and practice. Consider for a moment that although the two strategies of arriving at giftedness differ, both ultimately result in a concept, a *definition* of giftedness. Both strategies assume that a defensible reading curriculum in gifted education differs in the same degree and dimension as the *properties* which define giftedness.

The priority of conceptual knowledge that underlies modernism is rooted in ancient Greece. Plato (1952) distinguished between *essentia*, the ontical properties which define a stable concept; and *existentia*, the ontological possibilities that are a dynamic part of a living in the world. Plato claimed that we cannot know what is changing and we must therefore presume existence. Knowledge, Plato wrote, is contained only in concepts that are abstracted from the flux and organized in theories which can then be used to explain the life-world. Plato despised opinion and regarded the common sense understanding by which ordinary people lived, such as good judgment, tact, crafts, and commerce as ignorance parading as knowledge. The ontological difference opens a portal of opportunity for understanding differently what is given in giftedness.

Excitement

Ontologically, a human being is not constituted by properties but by *possibilities*. What is given ontologically is the common gift of living in the world and the possibilities of making our own the gifts that life presents. Ontological hermeneutics turns reading research toward the becoming of the person, the life-long transformations as the person becomes more him or herself. Hermeneutics is interested in the wonder of not-yet,

future possibilities; rather than the stable properties that define what-was or what-is. As humans we are always not-yet-finished, we are always not-yet-ready for definition. My attention shifted from *being* a gifted reader to wonder about the possibilities of children *becoming* gifted. What does reading as a way of life mean? What are the possibilities for becoming gifted by making their own the gifts that reading presents? The selection of participants for the study shifted to include not only three 12-year-old candidates for a gifted program who were reading at the Grade 7, 9, and 12 levels respectively but also three students of "average" ability, ages 12, 15, and 17 who were reading at their respective grade levels in Grade 7, 9 and 12.

The second signpost to understanding the shift to hermeneutics in this research begins with background on method and interpretation.

From Method to Interpretation

Background

Plato's distinction between true knowledge and common sense understanding forms the basis for the modern era of science in the seventeenth century writing of Descartes (1952). Descartes argued that to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences the scientist must get rid of all prejudice. This requires a subject-object separation: "I must once and for all, and by a deliberate effort, rid myself of all those opinions to which I have hitherto given credence, starting entirely new, and building from the foundation up" (p. 196). Cartesianism proceeds by method.

My original project was designed for the constant comparative method in the discovery of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is referred to as a "scientific method" for inductively building theory through the qualitative analysis of data. According to Strauss and Corbin, researchers need to see the "objective" meaning that

is *there in the text* and to render a faithful account of that object of study: "Data themselves never lie" (p. 44).

Challenge

The hermeneutic challenge is to truth through method. In seeking to eliminate prejudice, method also eliminates possibilities. Gadamer (1989) argued that the "antithesis of all objectivism is the life-world...the whole in which we live as historical creatures" (p. 247). He observed that "unlike the methodology of modern science," the interpretive inquiry of hermeneutics "is a passion, an understanding, an event that happens to one" (p. 465). Being lost in a book, enchanted by a poem, or transfixed by a character can never really be seen, heard, touched, or measured and thereby resists method. Moreover, Gadamer argued that the prejudices, or pre-judgments, of the interpreter are not a barrier to but the condition of understanding. The new in life is *always* understood in relation to what is *already* known. This means that inquiry is always already situated and pre-judgment in the reading of a situation projects the horizon for interpretation. The hermeneutic notion of situation is being-in-the-world. Individuals are thrown into the midst of an ongoing tradition they did not choose, do not fully understand and whose temporal-historical horizons limit vision. The constant task of hermeneutics is to bring to conscious awareness what is at work in narrowing or broadening our pre-understanding of a situation. In coming to a new and different understanding of a topic, those pre-understandings are challenged and tested in the dialogical relationship.

Opportunity

The difficulty in hermeneutic inquiry in not in reproducing exactly an individual's speech, gestures, and actions. The truth about the topic of conversation cannot be

revealed through an objective examination of a transcript because the meaning is not in the text. Hermeneutic understanding of gifted reading involves interpreting what is *at play* in what readers are saying and doing. We cannot follow the play by simply watching video tapes or reading protocols of what readers say and do without knowing something about the game in which the readers are players. The game belongs to a culture, a way of structuring life. Interpreting readers' accounts, therefore, is to *wonder* about the meaning of reading as a gifted way of living in a world to which I-they-we-belong. Carson (1986) underscores that the interest is ontological: What truth does this conversation bring into being?

Excitement

Truth in hermeneutic interpretation emerges in a fusion of horizons of interpreter, text, and topic. Figure 1 is offered as an aid to understanding the sympathetic vibrations in the fusion of horizons. The tuning fork is the universal symbol for resonance. The three ellipses are intended to suggest the separate horizons of interpreter, text, and topic that resonate when the triad are in harmony.

Figure 1

Cole (1985) reminds us that resonance is a familiar metaphor in the language arts. When reading, information about the topic must present itself at the right time and strike us in the right way for sympathetic vibrations to occur. We speak of ideas that resonate and anecdotes that ring true. If the energy that is put into the reading does not strike a responsive text, the energy quickly dissipates without producing a harmony of meaning. Cole points out that it is like striking notes that are out of tune with each other

on a piano. It does not set up resonance but "steals your harmony and leaves you noise" (p. 267). "Resonance" means to sound again and again, or to echo. In hermeneutic interpretation we must work with the text to get on the same wavelength in order to make lasting, meaningful music.

The third signpost in the turn to hermeneutics is from metacognition to the hermeneutic circle.

From Metacognition to the Hermeneutic Circle

Background

One of the most prominent areas of reading research is metacognition, self-awareness and self-regulation of learning. The metacognitive reader has a split focus and is able to "step back and consider his or her own thought (or language) as itself an object of thought and to use the subsequent conceptualization to direct and redirect one's cognitive theories" (Brown & Palincsar, 1982, p. 2). The Tetrahedral Model (Jenkins, 1979) provided a framework for examining an individual's metacognition in relation to four interactive variable clusters in reading: characteristics of the learner, learning task, learning material, and learning activities. Metacognition is an executive role that directs the interaction of variables. Self-conscious metacognitive processes are widely assumed to be the essence of intellectual giftedness and of intellectual activities such as reading.

Challenge

Hermeneutics challenges that there is *more* to gifted reading than self-conscious executive processes that technically orchestrate reading variables. Challenging metacognition in a study of gifted reading calls into question what may be the most cherished modernist assumption. From the time of Plato's Socrates, it has been taken-

for-granted that self-consciousness awareness is what fundamentally makes us human: The unexamined life is not worth living. This was echoed by Descartes: I think therefore I am. Hermeneutics reminds us that self-consciousness awareness is secondary knowledge, thinking about thinking, that presumes the primary understanding of lived experience. Hermeneutics sticks with the original difficulty of understanding what it means to be living in the world. We are always already living in the world *before* we begin to contemplate our lives.

Opportunity

The hermeneutic circle provides the opportunity for understanding the ontological primacy of a gifted way of living with texts. Figure 2, whose shape was suggested by Escher's (1967) woodcuts, is offered as an aid to understanding the hermeneutic circle.

Figure 2

The figure appears to have four separate paths. But Hermes is a trickster. If we imagine the figure to be a pathway that can be entered at any point and the twisting surface followed around the figure, we discover that there are not four separate surfaces but one *continuous* path which leads the traveller around the figure four times. These four turns draw attention to four gifts that present themselves in reading around the hermeneutic circle: imagination, enigma, ignorance, and incarnation.

Imagination. The gift of imagination is a playing with possibilities. In real life, we do not know how the story will twist and turn. Life is not a series of problems with tidy solutions. Imagining possibilities in reading tests the courage of our convictions by taking a stand while acknowledging that we are living without certainty. The creative

spirit imagines the possibility of something new and attempts to transform the old by going beyond *what-is* to predict *what-is-not-yet*. In this way, reading imaginatively makes life *more* complicated and *more* risky, not less so. Imagination, however, does not take place in a void. Whether reading print or reading the world, we always predict what is possible, probable, and practical from the standpoint of background knowledge. This requires readers to become aware of who they are and to anticipate the way what they already know, believe, and feel about a particular topic influences what can be made of the text.

Imagination, however, is only a gift for those who recognize its possibilities and there are factors in modernism working against this. Modernism privileges technical know-how where it is assumed that those things which can be measured and counted are more real than those which cannot be quantified. Orr (1993) pointed out that because there is something mysterious about imagination, the understanding that emerges is not characterized by the precision and objectivity that defines Cartesian knowledge. There is, therefore, the danger that imaginative reading will be dismissed as a meaningless activity, mere opinion rather than Platonic truth.

Enigma. The gift of enigma in reading presents itself within the multivocity of text, voices that speak differently about a topic. Expanding our horizons and coming to a new understanding of a topic requires the hermeneutic salute to the stranger in our midst. This means that a gifted way of living with texts welcomes confusion as an invitation to risk being open to an encounter with something new on the horizon.

Possibilities for a gifted reading relationship are lost if readers abandon what is enigmatic in text. The gift is left unopened if readers mistake being confused with being a poor reader. Opportunities are missed if readers view confusion in text as a technical

problem to fix, rather than a positive possibility for dialogue about the not-yet-known in life.

Ignorance. The beginning of wisdom is the gift of ignorance, knowing you do not know. Readers must be open to exploring the distance that separates them from a topic. In this regard, Gadamer (1989) writes about "making the text speak" (p. 377). The reader accepts the text as the other voice in a dialogue with something to say about a particular topic. Conversation is an art. Gadamer observes there is always *genius* in creating a work of art. To understand reading as a gifted way of life we must work with that genius toward *congenial* understanding of aesthetic experience. As with any conversation, finding a gap or opening that invites a question is not arbitrary but takes into consideration the demands the text places on the reader. The art of conversation involves asking the question for which a particular text is the answer.

Possibilities for giftedness are lost if readers regard questioning as a method. There can be no predetermined script or question taxonomy for a genuine conversation. "Dialogue must find what to say and what to ask in the midst of the dialogue itself, which cannot be replicated" (Crusius, 1991, p. 38).

Incarnation. The gift of incarnation reveals the seeming paradox that becoming oneself is a matter of losing oneself. In understanding something we can only begin with ourselves but in coming to understand something differently we change. We make the possibilities of reading a text our own by listening and allowing our opinions to develop in a dialogical reading relationship with text partners whose horizons differ from our own. Gadamer (1989) uses the term "incarnation" in talking about what he calls the "miracle of language" (p. 420) in which the text content becomes living human flesh. The text is understood to be the lived experience of other persons. In understanding

those experiences, the reader and text share an ontological relationship that dissolves the distance between them as the reader makes that knowledge his or her own.

The possibilities of gifted reading are lost when the text is regarded as inert matter on which to operate. Inert knowledge is a long-standing educational issue. According to Whitehead (1970), traditional education is in the business of dead knowledge. This dead knowledge produces a "mental dryrot" that kills the ferment of genius. Whitehead reminds us that when we talk about knowledge we are talking about human minds and not dead matter. Hermeneutic interpretation enlivens and keeps knowledge alive.

In summary, reading around the hermeneutic circle discloses a gifted way of living with texts. What is required of readers is the recognition that humans exist in the world as possibilities. Changing possibilities into actualities in reading involves imagining what is not-yet present, being open to the other voice in the text, taking the risk of exploring the strangeness of the not-yet-known, and being more ourselves by incarnating the texts of others' lived experience. This transformation is ontological giftedness, a constant striving for personal excellence that exists as a permanent positive human possibility for *all* students through the reading relationship.

Reading the Importance of Hermeneutics

Reading is the hermeneutic metaphor for human understanding. The explicit hermeneutic influence within the professional reading community, by way of contrast, is virtually nonexistent. A survey of the reading literature reveals a community where the familiar boundaries of modernism establish membership, govern the conduct of inquiry, and judge the worthiness of results. Conversation is important in building any community and what is required to maintain and move the conversation along is not

consensus but voices that speak differently about a shared topic of interest. Hermeneutics offers a postmodern voice in that conversation.

The hermeneutic difference, however, makes a difference with profound implications. Mueller-Vollmer (1992) observed that in some quarters hermeneutics has become a "voguish" term, as if we are dealing with a new paradigm that will provide us with alternative procedures for research. I wish to emphasize that although I found the term paradigm shift helpful in writing about the turn to hermeneutics, to read hermeneutics as a paradigm misses hermeneutics. Kuhn (1977) wrote that as a physicist he came late to the realization that most writers in the humanities become aware of in the course of their studies. Consciously or not, we *all* practice hermeneutics. The hermeneutic difference is ontological, part of being-in-the-world. Humans find themselves in the midst of life and the circular hermeneutic process is what happens in coming to understand ourselves and our world. Thus, hermeneutics is *not* another paradigm for which there are alternatives. The practice of hermeneutics is a homecoming, an excursion and return to one shared world *before* paradigm boundaries. Before we as reading researchers abstract the essence of lived experience we are all hermeneuticists who stand together on common ground in the desire to improve conditions for students and teachers in the educational life-world.

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Figure 1. Sympathetic vibrations in a hermeneutic fusion of horizons.

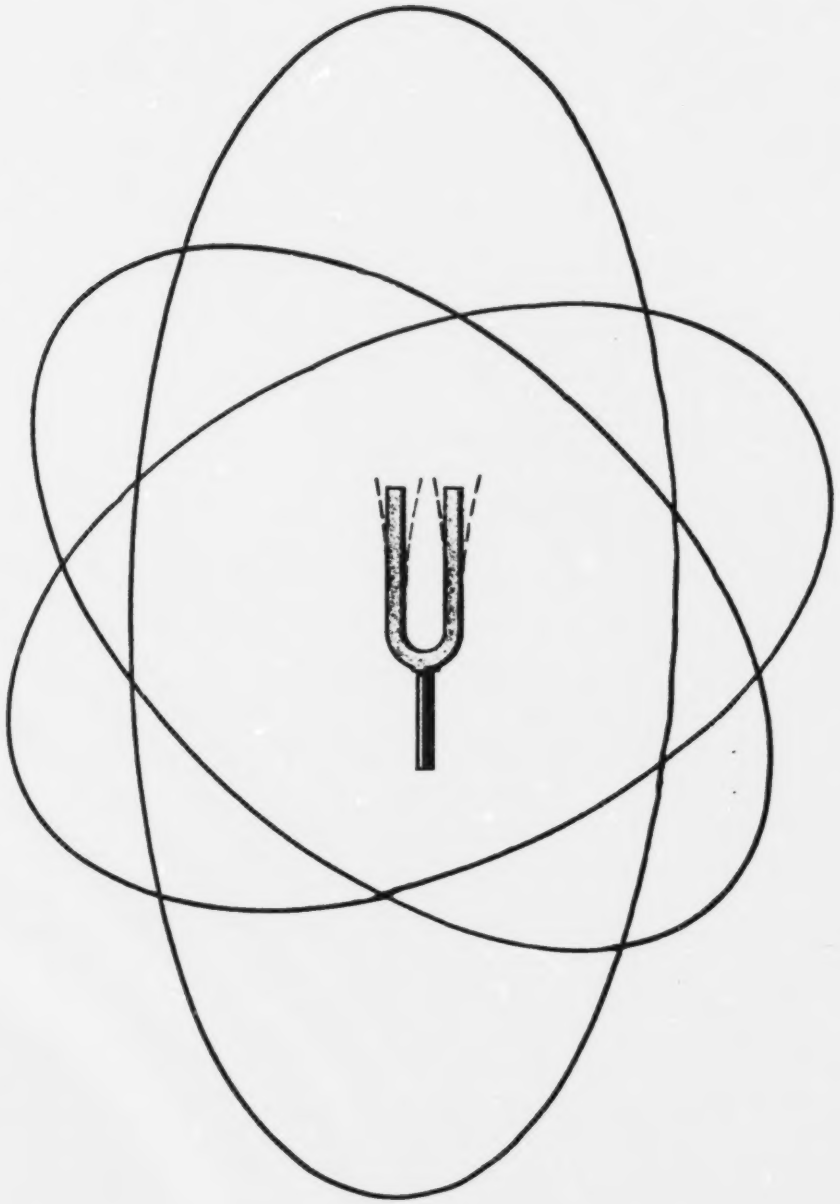

Figure 2. The circular path of hermeneutic understanding.

(Suggested by Escher, 1967, Plate 39)